

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS

Conlang: The Art and Science of Language Invention – LING 2980

Fall Semester 2025

General Information:

Instructor: Dorian Roehrs
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Main office: (940) 565-4552

Office hours: MW 3:00 – 3:30 (LANG 409L) and by appointment

Class meets: MW 3:30 – 4:50 (LANG 202)

Important Dates:

Final project: Wednesday, December 10

Course Description and Objectives:

Dothraki, Elvish, and Klingon are constructed languages (conlangs). Conlangs are not the result of natural evolution in language communities but rather a conscious creation of (typically) a single person. Constructing a language requires a good understanding of certain components of linguistics (phonetics/phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics/pragmatics) and of the relation of language to culture. This introductory course is concerned with the analysis and creation of artificial languages. Focusing on the linguistic part of this creation, the ultimate goal of the course is to construct new languages that show features of their natural counterparts.

The basic objectives of this course are twofold:

- 1) to get acquainted with a number of key concepts in linguistics
- 2) to develop the conceptual tools needed for analyzing languages

More generally, the course aims at developing analytical linguistic skills and a deeper understanding of language; specifically:

- Understand the difference between sounds, phonemes, and allophones
- Understand the difference between words, morphemes, and allomorphs
- Identify typical combinations of phonemes and morphemes
- Analyze how phrases and sentences are structured
- Explain why certain combinations are more typical than others
- Explore and examine the relation of the meaning of language and culture/context
- Explain how and why languages change

The methodology is as follows: Each session starts with a discussion of the assigned reading. This is followed by the application of that knowledge to analyze the relevant parts of the conlang Kebreni (as presented in Rosenfelder 2015). Finally, each student will, in a stepwise fashion, construct their own conlang, beginning during class and finishing it as part of homework assignments that will culminate in the presentation and essay of a final project. The Final Project consists of a short reference grammar based on natural language principles. As a test of this grammar, students will translate a short text/sentences into their conlang. Note that this class is participatory (this is not just a lecture course); that means, students should take notes on their readings at home.

Required Text (some parts of the book are available on YouTube as videoclips):

Peterson, David J. 2015. *The Art of Language Invention. From Horse-Lords to Dark Elves, the Words Behind World-Building*. New York: Penguin Books.

Movie (clips will be shown in class):

Conlanging: The Art of Crafting Tongues (2017)

General Course Policies:

1. Attendance: Repeated unexcused absences and tardiness will affect your grade significantly. *Three tardies* are the equivalent of *one absence*. You are allowed a maximum of *two (2) absences without penalty*. After two absences, your attendance grade will suffer in percent. *After the eighth absence*, you will receive a failing grade for the entire class. Under certain circumstances, special accommodations can be made at the instructor's discretion.

2. Participation: Careful preparation for class and regular, active participation are the foundation of this course!

3. Homework: There are assignments for each class period. The reading assignments will consist of taking notes from a chapter. In addition, students will construct their own language in five steps culminating in a Final Project. Final Project Part 1 will focus on sounds and Part 2 on sound combinations; Final Project Part 3 will be concerned with the construction of words and Part 4 with the construction of phrases and clauses. Every two to three weeks, the relevant parts will be presented in class as part of creative language workshops and turned in to the instructor as short essays.

4. Final Project Part 5: The Final Project will involve a short reference grammar (sounds and sound combinations, construction of words and phrases/clauses, and a word list and short translation) of a language each student will construct. This work will consist of Part 1 through 4 just mentioned, adding two further components to it – a list of lexical items and idioms and a translation of a short text/sentences into the student's conlang. In the final part of the class, students will present their work to the class for feedback, and the final essay will be due on **December 10 (11:59 pm)**.

5. Contents, Length, and Format of Presentations:

Contents:	Selection of a few highlights of the reference grammar to get feedback on
Length:	5 minutes max (project updates on Parts 1-4) 10 – 12 minutes max (presentation of Part 5)
Format:	PowerPoint presentation

6. Contents, Length, and Formatting of Essays:

Final Project Part 1 (sound inventory):	2 - max. 3 pages
Final Project Part 2 (sound combinations):	2 - max. 3 pages
Final Project Part 3 (construction of words):	3 - max. 5 pages
Final Project Part 4 (construction of phrases/clauses):	3 - max. 5 pages
Final Project Part 5 (Part 1-4; word list, translation):	12 - max. 18 pages

Turn in as hard copy, staple multiple pages

Formatting: 12-point font, Times New Roman, double-spaced, 1-inch margins all around

Late work, be it giving a presentation or turning in an essay, is penalized by 10% off the obtained grade for every weekday the work is late (unless this is an emergency or cleared with the instructor ahead of time).

Students are encouraged to exchange ideas, but each student must present/turn in their own work. In this course, I want you to engage deeply with the materials and develop your own critical thinking and writing skills. For this reason, **the use of Generative AI (GenAI) tools like Claude, ChatGPT, and Gemini is not permitted**. While these tools can be helpful in some contexts, they do not align with our goal of fostering the development of your independent thinking. Using GenAI to complete any part of an assignment will be considered a violation of academic integrity, as it prevents the development of your own skills, and will be addressed according to the Student Academic Integrity policy. Finally, all class communication will be sent to your official UNT email address.

Evaluation:

Attendance and <i>active</i> participation	10%
Final Project Part 1	10%
Final Project Part 2	10%
Final Project Part 3	10%
Final Project Part 4	10%
Final Project Part 5 (presentation)	15%
Final Project Part 5 (essay)	35%

Grade Distribution:

A = 100 – 90%
B = 89.9 – 80%
C = 79.9 – 70%
D = 69.9 – 60%
F = 59.9 – 0%

Religious Holidays:

In accordance with Section 51.911 of the Texas Education Code, UNT will allow a student who is absent from class for observance of a religious holy day to take an examination or complete an assignment scheduled for that day within a reasonable time. Students are required to file a written request with each professor within the first 15 days of the semester to qualify for an excused absence. A copy of the state rules and procedures regarding holy days and the form for notification of absence from each class under this provision are available from the Registrar's Office.

American with Disabilities Act Compliance:

The University of North Texas makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking reasonable accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with a reasonable accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding your specific needs in a course. You may request reasonable accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of reasonable accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of reasonable accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. Students are strongly encouraged to deliver letters of reasonable accommodation during faculty office hours or by appointment. Faculty members have the authority to ask students to discuss such letters during their designated office hours to protect the privacy of the student. For additional information, refer to the Office of Disability Access website at <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access>. You may also contact ODA by phone at (940) 565-4323.

Acceptable Student Behavior:

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The university's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including university and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The Code of Student Conduct can be found at <https://policy.unt.edu/policy/07-012>

Sexual Discrimination, Harassment, & Assault

UNT is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. If you (or someone you know) has experienced or experiences any of these acts of aggression, please know that you are not alone. The federal Title IX law makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender are Civil Rights offenses. UNT has staff members trained to support you in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, helping with legal protective orders, and more.

UNT's Dean of Students' website offers a range of on-campus and off-campus resources to help support survivors, depending on their unique needs: <http://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources>.

The UNT Survivor Advocates can be reached by emailing SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or calling 940-565-2648. The UNT Survivor Advocates connect students who have been impacted by violence to resources (counseling, health, safety, academics, legal, etc.), and act as their advocate. They can assist a student by filing protective orders, completing crime victim's compensation applications, contacting professors for absences related to an assault, working with housing to facilitate a room change (if needed), and connecting students to the many other resources that are available, both on and off campus. They are here to help! For more information see <https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/sexual-misconduct/reporting-sexual-misconduct>

Student Perceptions of Teaching (SPOT):

The student evaluation of teaching effectiveness is a requirement for all organized classes at UNT. A short survey will be made available to you at the end of the semester, providing you a chance to comment on how this class is taught. I am very interested in the

feedback I get from students, as I work to continually improve my teaching. I consider SPOT to be an important part of your participation in this class.

Tentative Schedule

PLEASE NOTE THERE WILL BE NO RIGID ADHERENCE TO THIS SCHEDULE, SHOULD THE CLASS NEED MORE TIME FOR SOME LESSONS AND LESS TIME FOR OTHER LESSONS.

Legend:

M = Monday; W = Wednesday

Introduction; Chapter + number => in Peterson (2015)

Semantics and Pragmatics => in Rosenfelder (2010); copy of pages will be provided by instructor

week	contents	assignments
WEEK 1 Aug. 18 – 22	M: Introduction to course; overall process of conlanging; Esperanto W: Introduction (history of conlangs, terminology); Postscript	Pages 1-23; 259-265
WEEK 2 Aug. 25 – 29	M: Chapter 1: Sounds (introduction, consonants) W: Chapter 1: Sounds (vowels, sound systems)	Pages 25-40 Pages 40-52
WEEK 3 Sept. 1 Labor Day Sept. 2 – 5	W: <i>Discussion of Final Project Parts 1</i>	Final Project Part 1 (sound inventory)
WEEK 4 Sept. 8 – 12	M: Chapter 1: Sounds (phonotactics, allophony) W: Chapter 1: Sounds (intonation, stress, tone)	Pages 52-61 Pages 61-78
WEEK 5 Sept. 15 – 19	M: Chapter 3: Evolution (intro, phonological) W: <i>Discussion of Final Project Parts 2</i>	Pages 163-178 Fin Proj Part 2 (sound combinations)
WEEK 6 Sept. 22 – 26	M: Chapter 2: Words (introduction, key concepts) W: Chapter 2: Words (nominal inflection: number, gender)	Pages 97-105 Pages 106-119
WEEK 7 Sept. 29 – Oct. 3	M: Chapter 2: Words (nominal inflection: case) W: Chapter 2: Words (nominal inflection: exponence)	Pages 120-132 Pages 132-135
WEEK 8 Oct. 6 – 10	M: <i>Discussion of Final Project Part 3</i> W: Chapter 2: Words (verbal inflection: tense, modality, aspect)	Fin Proj Part 3 (construction of words) Pages 136-143
WEEK 9 Oct. 13 – 17	M: Chapter 2: Words (verbal inflection: valency) W: Chapter 2: Words (derivation, word order)	Pages 143-148 Pages 148-152
WEEK 10 Oct. 20 – 24	M: Syntax W: <i>Discussion of Final Project Part 4</i>	Fin Proj Part 4 (construction of phrases and clauses)
WEEK 11 Oct. 27 – 31	M: Semantics 1 (lexical hierarchy, metaphor) W: Semantics 2 (register, names)	Pages 92-97, 103-109 (in Rosenf. 2010) Pages 111-118 (in Rosenfelder 2010)
WEEK 12 Nov. 3 – 7	M: Chapter 3: Evolution (lexical, grammatical) W: Sign Language	Pages 178-197 Documentary film
WEEK 13 Nov. 10 – 14	M: Pragmatics: Language and Culture/Context W: Chapter 4: The Written Word	Pages 125-130, 133-137, 140-143 (in Rosenfelder 2010) Pages 209-228
WEEK 14 Nov. 17 – 21	M: <i>Preparation of Final Project</i> W: <i>Presentations and Feedback</i>	Preparation of Final Project Presentation of Final Project Part 5
Thanksgiving (11/24-11/28)		
WEEK 15 (Pre-final w) Dec. 1 – 5 Dec. 5 Reading Day	M: <i>Presentations and Feedback</i> W: <i>Presentations and Feedback</i>	Presentation of Final Project Part 5 Presentation of Final Project Part 5
Finals	December 10, 2025	Essay of Final Project Part 5